

**Building Temples in Our Hearts**  
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**Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**April 13, 2008**

*I do not know where it began, but you do. .*

*It began with a discontent, a gnawing in the soul, an out-of-placeness. It began with heresy.  
Or perhaps it began with an expansiveness that drove you to seek, to inquire. It began with thoughtful inquiry.*

*And it was a friend, an acquaintance, a colleague who was Christian, Jew, Muslim, a Hindu stranger in a college class, an unchurched but discerning woman at a community meeting who said “You sound like a Unitarian.” A member of this congregation or another said “Come visit my church,” and it wasn’t an intrusion, it was a kindness, a courtesy, and you found your way home.*

*No -- you are a home-bred Unitarian Universalist. Your parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents trusted this faith with what they held most dear in the world: the hearts, the minds, the very souls of their children.*

*No -- you searched on the web, you answered a survey on belief.net. You entered some magic combination of words, clicked the “I Feel Lucky” button and Googled your way to this saving faith.*

*I do not know when it began, but you do....*

*Draw that beginning near and hold it close for our time together on this warm Sunday morning.*

I’m going to start with a confession: this is not a fundraising/canvass/stewardship sermon. I don’t have a fundraising/canvass/stewardship sermon. And this isn’t a fundraising sermon. I won’t ask you for money in this sermon, so if that’s the part you are here for, you should leave now before you’ve invested any more of your morning with me. If you hoped that I’d name a figure, or hint at a percentage, you’re in the wrong place. We won’t be passing the plate around a few times during the sermon. There will be no scantily clad women – or men – enticing you to throw in a few more bucks. Nope. Not here. Not today.

Some time this week or next you’ll be sitting with another member of this congregation, thinking about the value of this church in your life, about the huge hole that would be left in this community were you to allow this church to be other, or less than it is. There you’ll be with a pledge card in hand, trying to determine the “right” number to write on the amount line, searching for a quantity that says “priceless” but unfortunately must be rendered in the form of a number using actual digits. Nothing I say this morning is going to be remotely useful to you at that time. Sorry.

But useless as I am, I am still happy to be here with you. I’m grateful to Roger for inviting me, to Heather for managing all the details required for me to be here, to Sarah and John for transportation and welcome.

I live in northwestern Michigan. I am an expert on what it is like to keep the faith alive in the hinterlands. And whether I’m in northern Michigan, or southern Louisiana, northern California, or here in Bethesda, one thing is true: Boston is a long way away. Actually, two things are true: Boston, the headquarters of our faith, is not only a long way away, it is actually the same distance from all of those places. Now in some faith traditions, geographic distance presents huge challenges. If you’re a Muslim, it’s harder to do the Hajj from Washington D.C. than from Kabul or Cairo. The Vatican is closer to Milan than to Maryland. But for Unitarian

Universalists, we need travel no further than we traveled this morning to visit our holy of holies. The words of Chicago-area layman, carpenter and poet Patrick Murfin (from his UUA Meditation Manual “We Build Temples in the Heart.”)

*We have seen the great cathedrals,  
stone laid upon stone,  
carved and cared for  
by centuries of certain hands;*

*seen the slender minarets  
soar from dusty streets  
to raise the cry of faith  
to the One and Only God;*

*seen the placid pagodas  
where gilded Buddhas squat  
amid the temple bells and incense.*

*We have seen the tumbled temples half-buried in the sands,  
choked with verdant tangles,  
sunk in corralled seas—  
old truths toppled and forgotten.*

*We have even seen the wattled huts,  
the sweat lodge hogans,  
the wheeled yurts,  
and the Ice Age caverns  
where unwritten worship  
raised its knowing voices.*

*But here we build temples in our hearts.  
Side by side we gather.*

*We mix the mortar of the scattered dust  
Of the Holy of Holies  
With the sacred water  
Of the Ganges;*

*Lay Moorish alabaster  
On the blocks of Angkor Wat  
And rough-hewn Stonehenge slabs;*

*Plumb Doric columns for strength of reason,  
Square them with stern Protestant planks,  
And illuminate all with Chartres’ jeweled windows  
And the brilliant lamps of science.*

*Yes, here we build temples in our hearts.  
Side by side we come,*

*Scavenging the ages for wisdom,  
Cobbling together as best we may  
The stones of a thousand altars, leveling with doubt,  
Framing with skepticism,  
Measuring by logic,  
Sinking firm foundations in the earth  
As we reach for the heavens.*

*Here we build temples in our hearts –  
A temple for each heart,  
A village of temples,  
None shading another,  
Connected by well-worn paths,  
Built alike on sacred ground.*

This is an image that appeals, an imagination with a Canadian feel. Canadians and Americans handle diversity differently. We have different national myths about how the many become one. America's myth is the "great melting pot," while Canadians often use the imagery of a quilt or a mosaic. The American story is a story of assimilation, a Borg story right out of Star Trek: *resistance is futile... you will be assimilated*. And our self imagining is critical. If our image is a melting pot, we can spend an inordinate amount of time being concerned with what the final mix will look like. Am I being melted into some spirituality that feels personally foreign? If you melt me, how will I find myself? What will I have to give up? The melting pot is a container filled with the personal loss required to become part of a recipe not necessarily of our making.

Building temples of the heart is an image of Unitarian Universalism not as a melting pot, but as a work of art. Is there a quilt in the house? Here in our Unitarian Universalist quilt, there is room for all, each square or triangle or other-shaped piece in its place, a place of meaning for each of us, a place for each of us to find and live a unique ministry in the world.

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And we are not alone this morning. This is not the only village of temples. There are similar villages in Orlando and Philadelphia, in Lancaster and Seattle and Lexington and New Orleans and San Francisco. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations includes member congregations in every state. Reach out and feel the hearts that beat in those other villages, hear the echoes of voices, some singing the same hymns we sing here this morning. Here and elsewhere in the United States, we build temples in our hearts.

But wait, there's more. There are Unitarians or Universalists or Unitarian Universalists in Transylvania and India, in Canada, England and Ireland. There are Unitarian Universalists gathering in Kenya, who are gathering and caring for those in Somalia. Feel the hearts beating in common rhythm. Hear the echoes of hymns in Hungarian and Finnish, in French and Spanish, songs that we have not yet learned to sing in languages we have not yet learned to understand. Then move beyond words, beyond language, into our common liturgy – liturgy: literally, *the work of the people*. Here, and elsewhere, we build temples on the sacred grounds of human hearts

and connect those private, personal temples with the well worn paths of community – within a congregation, between congregations, around the world.

Here, and elsewhere, the soul's song, the heart's deepest longing is similar. Here's what's in my heart. Maybe some of what is in my heart is in your heart, too. I want to experience that which moves me to awe and wonder and humility -- what some call "the holy" -- not once, but over and over again. That experience moves me to gratitude, to compassion, to a desire to make at least one corner of the world a better place not only for me and mine, but for every other heart that can be so moved. I want to love life so much that I am compelled to live a life that leaves a mark. The Marge Piercy poem excerpted in our hymnal notes that we, like the Hopi vases and Grecian urns in museums were made to be used, that "the pitcher cries out for water to carry, and a person for work that is real."

Philosopher and performance poet George David Miller puts it another way:

*The big moments of life are not:  
When the walls of Jericho tumble  
When Haley's Comet sparkles across the sky  
When a knockout punch fells a fighter  
Or when Sisyphus' boulder finally goes over the hill.  
The big moments of life  
Are not when the boulder clears the ridge  
But when we tie our shoes  
Spit on our hands  
Take deep breaths  
Flex our muscles  
Focus all our energy  
And do it all over again*

*Realizing  
Each moment is history  
Each moment is passion  
Each action is meaning*

*With Big Mac breath  
Tide-scented clothes  
And a Wal-Mart fanny pack  
We can still raise our arms  
To the heavens and scream  
"I have lived, I have lived"—  
Carving epic lives  
From ordinary moments.*

Our foremothers and forefathers knew this. Examine the history of any significant social institution in this country, and you'll find it peopled with Unitarians and Universalists. From public health to public education to election reform to civil rights, they had a commitment to improve public life, to build the common good. We should not be shy about our history. We should name those on whose shoulders we stand.

For example, basic health care and nutrition for the entire world would cost \$13 billion annually. Europeans and North Americans spend \$17 billion on pet food and \$21 billion on cosmetics and perfume each year. We have the resources to create a healthy world. It isn't a question of resources but of values, of compassion.

When we speak from our values and insist on health care for every child, we stand on the shoulders of Martha May Eliot, a pediatrician who piloted community-wide programs to end rickets, a childhood disease that disproportionately affected poor children. For more than fifty years Martha May Eliot played a pivotal role in the development of health services for mothers and children worldwide.

*Each moment is history*

*Each moment is passion*

*Each action is meaning*

When we stand against racial and ethnic discrimination, when we stand against racism and oppression, we stand on the shoulders of Whitney Young. Young dedicated his life to the struggle for racial justice. We stand on the shoulders of James Reeb, martyred in Selma.

When we work for marriage equality, when we stand on the side of love, we stand firmly rooted in our tradition and shoulder to shoulder with our sister and brother Unitarian Universalists across the United States.

*Each moment is history*

*Each moment is passion*

*Each action is meaning*

When we give our money and our time to rebuild congregations and communities lost to natural and human-made disasters we stand on the shoulders of Unitarians and Universalists who donated to rebuild the churches of Chicago and San Francisco after fires over a century ago. Those who rebuild in New Orleans, Gulfport, Biloxi and south Florida are rooted firmly in our history.

Unitarian Universalist roots go deep, so deep that wind cannot uproot them, water cannot wash them away, quakes cannot shake them loose and fire cannot destroy them. Our roots are deep, not just in Louisiana and Florida and Mississippi, but in Michigan and Washington and New York and Maryland. And the need for our message is so great that we put aside trivial differences and pick up hammers and trowels and Guest at Our Table boxes and paintbrushes and pots and pans and extra blankets and coats and put them to work with other Unitarian Universalists to create the world that can only be *if we care enough to breathe it into being*.

Why in the world do we do this? Where does this impulse to care, to build come from? What drives our tenacious need to stick firm foundations in the earth as we reach for the heavens? Hear these words from my colleague, the Reverend Burton Carley, minister of our church in Memphis:

*We did not create or earn or deserve this day. It is a gift to us. We don't own anything. The world and everything in it, whether its source comes from Creation or humanity, is on loan to us, entrusted to our care for our time.*

*Truly we will take nothing with us when we die. Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. What we enjoy, our homes, our businesses, our cities and towns, art and literature, the rivers and oceans, the mountains and forests and plains, our family and friends, our bodies, our religious tradition, our congregations, are on loan. We do not own them.*

*Therefore, the only significance of things is our relationship to them.*

*We are the trustees and stewards of life's gifts, and what this requires of us is to care for everything that outlasts us, in humility and gratitude to nurture and savor what has been given, and to return everything at the end in as good or better condition than we received it.*

*Giving is a way of saying thank you and the recognition of my dependence, and generosity a way of life that takes seriously my stewardship of the blessings and grace given to me for no reason at all.*

*...I am profoundly grateful for a religious tradition, for a congregation...that enables me to return such a small proportion of what I have received. So you see that my giving is not about money, it is about being in right relationship to everything that matters most, to life itself, to God in whom I live and move and have my being.*

Like Burton, I am grateful for a faith that inspires so many to live lives of passion and meaning, to build the common good, to do the patient, sometimes heartbreaking work that is needed to improve our communities and the world. I am grateful for all those who labor to create loving authentic faith communities where we can learn how to live balanced lives in an unbalanced society.

We are a faith that inspires commitment. Ours is the faith of Abigail and John Adams, Paul Revere and Daniel Webster, Ambrose Bierce, Charles Dickens, Florence Buck, Olympia Brown, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, Louisa May Alcott, Ray Bradbury, Buckminster Fuller, Albert Schweitzer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Carl Sandburg, May Sarton, e e cummings, Pete Seeger, Frank Lloyd Wright, P.T. Barnum, Jane Addams, Clara Barton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, Maria Mitchell, Joseph Priestly, Tim Berners-Lee, Clarence Darrow, Julia Ward Howe, Dorthea Dix, Paul Newman, and Christopher Reeve.

When your children and their children create lists of Unitarian Universalists whose lives serve as shining examples, Unitarian Universalists who built the common good, don't you hope they will speak your name, tell how you carved an epic life from ordinary moments, how you lived a grateful life with the sure knowledge that each moment is history, each moment is passion, each action is meaning?

I want to be remembered in my village. I assume you want to be remembered right here in yours. I assume you want to know, need to know, that one hundred years from now, hundreds or even thousands of Unitarian Universalists will gather here in Bethesda, light a chalice, worship in its glow, and take that light out into the world. What other immortality do you know you will find?

I am grateful for the opportunity – the requirement – to share what I know of the temple in my heart with others in my congregation. We talk about why this faith is our faith, why it inspires us and makes us smile and sing and get about the work of the world. Friends, alone each of us is small, frail, mortal, temporal and temporary. Together, we are the very stuff of which hope is made. There is endless potential for world-shaking change generated by those well-worn paths from one human heart to the next to the next. Thank you for your faith, for your faithfulness, for walking and building and tending the paths of this community.

*Here – and everywhere -- we build temples in our hearts –  
A temple for each heart,  
A village of temples,  
None shading another,  
Connected by well-worn paths,  
Built alike on sacred ground.  
Amen*